1: Ray E-5 (1928-38) 1939 Plateau

# SOCIAL CULTURE

## POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

### General Orientation

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A clear picture of political organization in the Plateau is indispensable to a proper understanding of intra-areal relations in other aspects of culture, and at the same time illuminates important historical problems of inter-areal character. In any general American perspective the cultures of the Pacific slope stand together in contrast to those east of the Cordillera. Kroeber pointed this out many years ago, emphasizing, among other traits, the atomistic nature of political organization in the west:

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> From Alaska to California there does not appear to have been a group that could be designated as a political unit, other than what it is usual to call the village; that is, the settlement on one spot. These villages may often have been in a state of neutrality toward each other, or even linked by peaceful trade, inter-marriage, and participation in each other's ceremonies and festivals; but they were linked like nations of the civilized world, whose intercourse, however intimate, friendly, and long enduring, is always as it were in a condition of suspense, because built on nothing more than the occasions of the moment, the states being irreconcilable units.[1]

This separatism is carried to the highest degree by the Indians of northwestern California, where even a village is not looked upon as a political unit, and chiefs are lacking entirely.[2] Such near-anarchy is, however, characteristic of but a small area, and the general coastal pattern of village autonomy must not be looked upon as a negative trait, as might be suggested by this extreme. Indeed, even in northwestern California the condition is in a sense a positive one, with group action achieved through the influence of rich men whose leadership is respected. It is the lack of distinct village unity that sets off northwestern California, rather than the nature of the leadership. Northward throughout the coastal strip, "chieftainship" is correlated with high rank, wealth, and often with sib leadership. But always the village is definitely recognized as the political unit.

This is not a mere matter of passive recognition or acceptance, however. Village autonomy is strongly defended; it is considered right and proper. In 1819 Franchère, the fur trader, wrote of the Lower Chinook,

[1] Kroeber, *Tribes of the Pacific Coast*, p. 396.
[2] Kroeber, *Handbook*, pp. 830–33.

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"All of the villages form so many independent sovereignties. . . . Each village has its chief."[3] My own Chinook informants affirmed the existence of village autonomy; they pointed out that able or well-liked village chiefs may exert an influence over other villages but insisted that this extended power is strictly unofficial.

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In coastal British Columbia, unilinear descent groups make their appearance and divide the political composition of the village. But the political integrity is maintained, even though any one chief must of necessity be a member of but one lineage. Indeed, the very existence of these sib groups has been attributed by Sapir to the splitting and uniting of villages. The villagers'

> adherence to their respective traditions will be such that neither of the former village communities will give up its peculiar set of privileges, so that a twofold division of the community, as accentuated by these privileges, will persist. If we imagine this process to have occurred several times, we will gradually arrive at a community which is subdivided into several smaller units which we may call septs or bands, or perhaps even clans, each of which has its distinct stock of legendary traditions and privileges exercised by its titled representatives and whose former connection with a definite locality is still remembered.[4]

Despite these disruptions and individualities of tradition, the political unity of the village is maintained.

Murdock points out that Haida [illegible] are strictly house or clan officials:

> The clan chief is always also a house chief, usually the richest and most powerful in the village. He holds his position by inheritance and cannot be deposed. His authority depends upon his wealth, personality, and prestige. [However,] where several clans inhabit a village, one of their chiefs may enjoy more prestige than the others, but this is due solely to his superior wealth or social status or to the number and strength of his followers.[5]

Even here, in the face of impressive clan dominance, the village is not lost as a political unit; at least no substitute or larger political unit emerges.

The specialized character of village autonomy on the Pacific slope is further indicated by contrast with conditions on the Asiatic side of Bering Strait. There the small local group is seldom independent; larger

[3] Franchère, *Narrative*, p. 250.
[4] Sapir, *Social Organization*.
[5] Murdock, *The Haidas*, pp. 237 f.

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affiliations are emphasized. It cannot be argued, therefore, that western America is merely passive debtor to Siberia.[6]

The wide perspective of the observations above, and the emphasis on the extreme coastal strip, is necessary as a background for discussion of Plateau organization since the latter conforms to the general western political atomism. We may now examine specific Plateau patterns.

### Village Autonomy

At the extreme south, Spier found that

> The Klamath are not a single political entity. There are four or possibly five subdivisions or tribelets, each occupying a distinct district, and practically autonomous. . . . The separatism is immediately clear in any discussion with them. They invariably reserve the name Klamath for the Klamath marsh-Williamson river division; all others are Klamath only by extension. The groups are readily defined by the districts they occupy, the names of which they bear; this, despite the lack of any sharp geographic division, such as we should expect to figure in political separatism.[7]

Murdock found similar conditions among the Tenino.

> They were divided into four sub-tribes or rather pairs of villages—one, with rather flimsy and temporary buildings, located on the [Columbia] river and used during the fishing season in the warmer months; the other, with substantial permanent dwellings, located several miles distant, usually away from the river, at a spot which provided water, fuel, and shelter from the winds during the colder half of the year. The four subdivisions [were] originally independent though always friendly.[8]

This unique arrangement of pairs of villages illustrates the depth of the village unit concept and indicates a persistent village allegiance.

Still farther north, among the Sanpoil, the village is equally emphasized in the political sense, but citizenship is less stable.

> The Sanpoil political unit was the village. Tribal organization in the ordinary sense was lacking entirely. The inhabitants of a village were known by the name of that village plus the prefix "s" or the suffix "x", or both. No term existed for any larger political aggregation, but there was a name for the more inclusive dialectic division. The members of each village were subject to their own chiefs and to no others. The chief of one village, no matter how small, answered in no wise to the chief of any other village. In fact one chief seldom

[6] Kroeber, *Tribes of the Pacific Coast*, p. 397.
[7] Spier, *Klamath Ethnography*, pp. 21 f.
[8] Ray and Others, *Tribal Distribution*, p. 396.